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Byzantine Writers and Readers: Storytelling in the Eleventh Century

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Although the arrangement of this book's three sections in reverse chronological order may deflect attention, it could reasonably be asked why the Byzantine section should open with the eleventh century, and proceed from there, since the next section will jump back to the classical world proper, or, more particularly, the Greek-speaking world under the Roman Empire. The hiatus, however, is not fortuitous. This is not to say that story-telling ceased with the Roman Empire, and only re-emerged several centuries later. But I am taking it that we can use, as a working definition of our subject — the novel — the creation of fictional narrative for its own sake. Such composition appears to require a certain level of cultural security before it can flourish; perhaps people need a certain shared perception of reality before they can cope with fiction.

In any case, the disappearance of the framework of city life — its contraction during the late antique period, and its collapse at the end of the sixth century — entailed the disappearance of an educational and cultural universe (Mango 1980:60–73). New forms of writing prevailed, and two main forms of narrative composition survived, which met the needs of a period of insecurity and reconstruction. Firstly history — but in the cramped form of chronography — insisted on the temporal continuity of the Byzantine Empire. Secondly, saints' lives reinforced a series of essential values and beliefs.

The relationship of the saint's life to the novel has often been discussed;[1] and in the symposium from which the present volume derives, a paper on hagiography was perhaps a missing ingredient. But, however much scope the saint's life offers to imaginative story-telling — and it can be argued that saints' lives

became increasingly to be used over the period as a vehicle for such exercises in imagination (Beck 1959:271) — there can never be any doubt as to the necessary and essential function of such stories, in reinforcing the central message of the protagonist's sanctity.

There is another striking aspect of much of the literature of the middle Byzantine period — from the seventh to the tenth centuries — which is particularly true of chronography and hagiography: the status of the text itself is not fixed. The narrative can be, and was, reorganised or retold in slightly different words, and large parts of one narrative can be embedded in another. This creates great problems for anyone attempting to edit such texts.[2] Even where it is possible to establish a central text, it is clear that copyists felt free to replace or relocate words or phrases.[3] To some extent, this mutability of the text seems to be associated with the language used; it seems that one effect of the undertaking of Symeon Metaphrastes, who, in the tenth century, carefully rewrote a series of saints' lives in 'high' literary language, was to stabilise the texts, since material in literary Greek was not so liable to alteration (Beck 1959:570 ff). Such an attitude to narrative accounts would seem to be at the opposite end of the spectrum from that which produces original creative writing.

The fascination of the eleventh century — which has been the subject of increasing study in recent years[4] — is that it is a period when we seem to detect the development of new ideas in many aspects of Byzantine life, before the impact of new influences from the West; in the phrase of Paul Lemerle, it is 'Byzance au tournant de son destin'. Not all such ideas came to fruition; and the form of the Byzantine novel which emerged in the twelfth century was not what could necessarily have been predicted from the developments in narrative in the eleventh; but it may still be useful to consider those developments.

The emergence of new ideas in the eleventh century seems to be underpinned by the development of a new prosperity and security in the empire (Kazhdan and Epstein 1985:Ch. 2). Although Constantinople was still the heart and focus of the empire, and the emperor the arbiter of power and influence, the tenth century had already seen a diffusion of both security and power. Provincial centres started to prosper, and provincial magnates were increasingly powerful in their own right. We find more and more evidence for the existence of a 'middle' class — a

class of reasonably prosperous and comfortable people below the level of the dominant aristocracy which was in direct communication with the emperor, and from whose ranks emperors could emerge. An urban example of this 'middle' class is Michael Psellós, one of the outstanding figures of the eleventh century; he exemplifies the urban intelligentsia who depended on literary culture for their success, and so were necessarily interested in all literary forms (Ahrweiler 1976:108 ff). A typical provincial example is one of the most accessible authors of the eleventh century, Kekavménos, who, after a career which seems to have been largely military, compiled a collection of advice and anecdotes in the third quarter of the eleventh century.[5] Kekavmenos seems to have been a man of moderate prosperity and eminence — he assumes that a man of his sort would own a provincial estate (36.10 ff) and might exercise local influence (56.31 ff), but he is very sensitive to the existence of a level of powerful provincial magnates superior to his own (40.32 ff).

Kekavménos does not devote very much time to considering life in the capital, and he does not write in the literary style of the educated intelligentsia of Constantinople. It is therefore of particular interest not only that he chose to write, but also that he advised the reading of books. The passages in which he discusses the uses of books are often quoted. One is quite general:

> Read a lot, and you will learn a lot. And, if you don't understand, take heart; when you have gone through the book frequently, knowledge will be given to you by God, and you will understand it. What you don't know, ask those who have knowledge, and don't be proud; for it's from this cause, from not wanting to ask and learn, that men are deficient in knowledge. (47.14 ff)

This advice is also summarised elsewhere: 'Whenever you are alone, if possible, let books be your occupation' (64.13), and it is echoed in a passage addressed to a military commander:

> When you are at leisure, and not busy with military duties, read military handbooks, and histories, and the books of the church. Don't say 'What benefit is there to a soldier from dogmas and church books?', for you will benefit a great deal. And, if you pay careful attention, you will gather from them not only dogmas and edifying stories, but also maxims

of intelligence, of morality and of strategy; for nearly all the Old Testament is stories of strategy. (19.13 ff)

Kekavménos also goes into greater detail:

> When you have taken up a book, read it while you are at leisure; when you have read a little, don't try to count the pages, or pick out what you think are the better bits and read them — it won't do you any good — but begin from the one cover which contains the beginning of the writing, and read it until there is no writing left in it, and it will do you a great deal of good. It's the act of a gossip-monger not to go through the whole book twice and three times, but to pick out a few bits for chattering. (60:21 ff)

These passages are not in the language of the intelligentsia, or of people who work regularly with books and documents; but they imply the availability of books, and an interest in them, among people below the very highest level of privilege, and outside the intelligentsia of Constantinople. This situation is illuminated by the survival of the will, dated 1059, of a rather similar figure, Evstáthios Voilás (Boilas), a landowner in eastern Asia Minor.[6] Voilás again is a prosperous man, who has served in the imperial administration, but who is very conscious of being overshadowed by the members of a more powerful élite (Lemerle 1977:49 ff). He does not give us his views on the use of books, but we have a list of the books which he owned, and which he bequeathed to the monastery which he founded. These include ten volumes of different parts of the Bible, and thirty-three liturgical volumes, as well as twelve volumes of patristic writings. But there are twenty-two other books. Five are saints' lives or apocrypha, and two are collections of sayings. Five are handbooks — civil law, canon law and grammar. Two are chronicles. He also owned a dreambook (for the interpretation of dreams); an Aesop; poems of George of Pisidia; an *Alexander romance*; a volume of Achilles Tatius; and a volume called *Persiká*.

It is vital not to overlook the predominance of ecclesiastical material in this collection; but the existence of the other volumes is of great interest. It provides further evidence for the emergence, in the eleventh century, of a reading class outside the urban intelligentsia; and there is some evidence for the development of new forms of narrative literature, which were perhaps of

particular interest to this class.

I mentioned above the tradition of chronicles — a continuous historical tradition which extends throughout the Byzantine period. The chroniclers themselves were very conscious of working within a tradition, and reinforced their continuity by deliberately overlapping and recapitulating each others' work. The main chronicler for the events from the mid-tenth to the mid-eleventh century is John Skilítzis, who wrote probably at the end of the eleventh century or in the very early years of the twelfth (Hunger 1978:389–93). For the first part of his narrative — which opens in 811 — he used the work of predecessors who have also survived; he provides a standard account, focusing on imperial actions and central events. From the middle of the tenth century, however, we do not have Skilítzis' sources, and there is also a shift in the focus of the narrative. Clearly, he records the activities of the emperors themselves — and, in the case of Nikifóros Fokás and John Tzimiskís, the great commanders, this gives him abundant material. But in 976 the young princes Basil II and Constantine VIII came to the throne, and were faced by a series of rebellions. The spotlight of the narrative shifts away from the emperors to their opponents, and above all to the heroic figure of Várdas Fokás, who had already revolted against John Tzimiskís, and who fought first for and then against Basil and Constantine. The campaigns are described in terms of his actions; the battle of Pangkalia in 979 against the rebel Várdas Sklirós is described in terms of the hand-to-hand combat between the two leaders, and we even learn the name of Sklirós' horse. Várdas Fokás rushes into battle 'judging a famous death better than a shameful and ignoble life' (326–7). This is the language of heroes. These passages have been attributed, surely rightly, to a chronicle of the important Fokás family (Hunger 1978:368). A few passages concentrate on the activities of Várdas Sklirós; these tend to emphasise his ingenuity and cunning, and might or might not come from an account of his life (333–5).

Perhaps more significant as to the nature of Skilítzis' sources is a story set at the end of Basil's war against Bulgaria (about 1018) involving a less famous man, Evstáthios Dafnomelís, who, with only two companions, tricked his way into the enemy camp, murdered the enemy chieftain, and escaped, against enormous odds. The language is more high-flown than that of the surrounding narrative, and the anecdote is undoubtedly out of proportion to the scale of the chronicle as a whole. It is told

entirely in terms of Dafnomelís' own enterprise and courage. Surrounded by enemies, he makes a fairly long speech, culminating in the claim: 'Even if we are killed, which those who are outnumbered must be, we will count death happy and fortunate, since we have someone who will seek out and avenge our blood' (360–3). Again, this is the language of heroes.

It seems beyond doubt that these parts of Skilítzis' account are drawn from narratives which were primarily intended to recount the exploits of Fokás or of Dafnomelís. The probable existence of a family chronicle of the Fokás family has been mentioned above. There also seems to have been a record of the heroic exploits of the Doúkas family, some of which survives in verse, and which can be shown to have influenced the development of the 'Diyenís Akrítis' poem (Beck 1971:48–63;63–97). The story of Dafnomelís suggests that such accounts were not restricted to the activities of the most powerful families, but may have been widespread at all levels of the ruling class. A further example can be detected at the very end of Skilítzis' chronicle. The general Katakalón Kekavménos rose — apparently from humble beginnings — to be a very successful commander in the 1040s and 1050s. From the moment he appears in Skilítzis' narrative, his actions are described very fully, and in consistently eulogistic terms; he is responsible for victories, and when he is involved in defeats, it is because his advice has been overruled. He is said to have been the preferred candidate for the throne in 1057, when in fact Isaákios Komninós became emperor; he then disappears into what seems to have been enforced retirement. As Jonathan Shepard has pointed out, there seems little doubt that the source for all this must be a partisan biography, or autobiography, of Katakalón, very probably written when he had fallen from favour (Shepard 1975–6).

It is perhaps relevant to observe here that Skilítzis, in his introduction, undertakes to avoid the expression of partisan views (4.45 f). This could be seen as a historian's commonplace; but in some ways it is inappropriate to the writing of 'ordinary' Byzantine chronicles. On the other hand, this could perhaps be understood as a reference to the narratives which he uses, concerned with families or with individuals, which were clearly strongly partisan, and which may well have been composed not only in order to enhance the standing of the persons concerned, but also to make particular political points. A good example of such an account is provided by a narrative preserved in the text of Kekavménos (66.19 – 73.23); he repeats — effectively verbatim

— the account of a revolt in 1066, which was written up by one of the ringleaders, Nikoulítzas Delfinás, while in subsequent captivity, and sent to his cousin, the father of Kekavménos (72.22). The story is extremely vivid, and also presents Nikoulítzas' actions in the best possible light; it must have been written as part of an attempt to regain respectability and imperial favour. This is a very 'low-level' example; the culmination of such writing on a larger scale can be seen in the *History* of Michael Attaliátis, with his heroic portrayal of Nikifóros Votaniátis, in the *Memoirs* of Nikifóros Vriénnios, and in the *Alexiad* of Anna Komniní.

The primary purpose of such writing must have been political; but the idea of using narrative accounts, rather than rhetorical apologetic, and the way in which such narratives were expressed, suggests that they were influenced by earlier romantic and heroic fiction, such as the texts owned by Evstáthios Voilás, and were directed towards a readership which would find such narrative more palatable than rhetoric, and they could in turn have stimulated the taste for such fiction. Here, perhaps, we can detect one developing trend in eleventh-century narrative with significance for the future. Just when the production of saints' lives decreases, we find the emergence of a new literature of secular heroes.

I would like to draw attention to one other development which I think is of significance for later developments. I return to Kekavménos, and his collection of advice on a range of topics. In many cases — and especially in military matters — he reinforced his advice with anecdotes drawn from real life. But occasionally he took a step towards fiction. One example is when he reinforces advice against lending money with a vivid description of the wiles of the wicked borrower (48.4–49.14). Another is provided by his account of the evils of second marriage:

> The man who has buried his wife has lost the half — or even more — of his life as well, if she is a good woman. And if he will be continent, he will be great before God, and he himself will live in great security and happiness, bringing up his children well, and his children will be carried along as if on a carriage, and his house will be in a peaceful state. But if he is pierced by the sting of lust, especially if he appears to be continent, as he enters and leaves the house he weeps, as if indeed remembering his wife, of blessed memory, and puts forward as an excuse the neglected state

> of his house and the bad condition of his children; he will befriend women who have experience in procuring — whom they call 'gossips'; he will think them worthy of being invited to his table, and the wretched man will honour the dishonourable. When he has given them what they require, he sends them messages, promising them great things, if they will procure him a beautiful wife. They promise him the best; then, having been paid in advance for this by a woman, they go to her and say 'We have found you the sort of man you want — enjoy his goods'. Then they return to the poor man, extolling her. After enchanting his ears and, every day, conversing with her and with him in a pleasing way, and enjoying the goods of both of them, they persuade him. For those who have been pierced by the sting of lust tend to fall as a result of what they hear. Then he took her, and his children were neglected. She yearned after other men, while desiring to subjugate her husband and, using enchantments, she changed him completely and destroyed him. But, if she is one of the decent sort of women, she lay on the marriage-bed and remembered the husband she had as a virgin, and her husband thought of his first bride and wept, and their marriage became a sorrow. (55.30–56.24)

There is a very clear precedent for this kind of composition, in the literature which lies behind Kekavménos' whole undertaking — the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The Book of Proverbs, which is mainly made up of simple admonitions, contains two such excursuses, of which one, on the wiles of a seductress (7.2–27), is picked up in the section on wicked women in the florilegia.[7] The device is used in sermons — so, for example, Basil has a lively description of the sufferings of a debtor in an attack on usury, which, again, is repeated in the florilegia.[8] A structural similarity among all these passages — in the Septuagint, in Basil and in Kekavménos — is that they all incorporate variations in tense between the future, the present and the past. In all these passages this seems to reflect an uncertainty as to whether the account is intended to be a general example — expressed in either the present or the future — or a specific narrative, expressed in the past. Such passages are constantly on the verge of pure fictional narrative. Similar excursuses are to be found in the 'Spanéas', an admonitory poem found in several recensions, which probably originated in the late

eleventh century; one recension includes a similar account of the evils of second marriage.[9]

This kind of excursus provides another possible area for the development of fictional narrative. A taste for narrative in support of moral points at this period helps to explain the translation, during the eleventh century, of the stories from the Oriental tradition described by George Kehayióglou in Chapter 16. The *Stefanítis and Ihnilátis* was translated by a doctor, Symeon Seth (Beck 1971:41–5); the *Sindípas* (Syntipas) was translated by a certain Michael Andreópoulos apparently for Gabriel, commander of Melitiní at the end of the eleventh century (Beck 1971:45–8), which suggests a milieu not very different from that assumed for Kekavménos and for Evstáthios Voilás. Another way in which the use of fictional narrative in support of a moral point would seem likely to develop is towards satire; and the twelfth century did indeed see the re-emergence of satire as a literary form.

There is one other ingredient of fictional writing for which adequate space cannot be given here — that of character description and development. Michael Psellós, whom I mentioned above, wrote a memoir — the so-called *Chronographia* — of the emperors under whom he lived; and he described them with outstanding clarity and perceptiveness. The book is full of vignettes, freshly observed — Constantine VIII running up tasty sauces; his daughter, the Empress Zoe, manufacturing perfumes in her room in the palace; Constantine IX overcoming serious illness in order to appear in public — all of these are without parallel in previous Byzantine literature, and they are never quite matched in subsequent writing. But the same approach to individualised and observed description is found in the work of some of Psellós' successors — for instance Nikifóros Vriennios and Anna Komniní — and does perhaps reflect another new development characteristic of the changes in the eleventh century.

While, therefore, there is no evidence in the eleventh century for the composition of pure fiction, it does seem to me that we can trace, within other writings, the development of features characteristic of — or necessary to — fictional writing. As well as the use of a new quality of description, we can observe the taste for two new kinds of story-telling: the hero story and the moral fable. Surely these are the essential progenitors of the novel.

Notes

1. See Hägg 1983: 154–65 and bibliography, 246–7.
2. As has been described by the Australian team currently working on a new translation, with commentary, of John Malalas (Jeffreys *et al.*: 1986).
3. For many examples, see the *apparatus criticus* to Skilítzis.
4. See, in particular, *Travaux et Mémoires* 6, 1976; Lemerle 1977; Kazhdan and Epstein 1985.
5. For a bibliography on Kekavménos see Hunger 1978: 162.
6. The text has been most recently edited and discussed by Lemerle 1977: 15–63. For an English translation see Vryonis 1957.
7. In the *Sacra Parallela*, attributed to John Damascene, PG 95.1320B. The florilegia are Byzantine collections of gnomic sayings, usually arranged under headings, which circulated widely; Voilás owned two, and the tradition can be shown to have influenced Kekavménos.
8. Basil adv.fen. in Ps. 14, PG 29.2640, quoted in *Sacra Parallela*, in the section on borrowers and lenders, PG 95.1365.
9. On the 'Spanéas', see Beck 1971: 105–8; for this passage, the edition by Zoras, *Rivista di Studi Bizantini*, 11 (1964): 47 ff, lines 440 ff.

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